

Skomer Island Puffin Factsheet



The Puffin is the best-known of the British auks – its colourful and slightly clown-like appearance making it immediately recognisable. The Puffin's short wings are used for 'flying' underwater in search of fish; large wings would be a disadvantage but small wings make flying in air rather more difficult and the birds must beat their wings rapidly to stay aloft. The Puffin's beak is only distinctively-coloured in summer; the large red and grey scutes or horny plates together with the fleshy yellow rosette in the corner of the mouth are grown late winter for use in display. After the breeding season they are moulted, the winter bill is relatively small and constricted at the base, and blackish in colour as is the face.

Populations

Formerly much more common in southern Britain, there are now few Puffin colonies south of the Scottish border and those of Skokholm and Skomer are two of the most important. Here the colonies were once much larger, but the reduced populations of today seem to be more or less holding their own. An accurate census is difficult, but the best estimates indicate that there may be about 2,000 breeding pairs on Skokholm and 6,000 on Skomer. On Skomer, the largest concentrations are on the Isthmus between North and South Haven and at The Wick, but they occur in small numbers along much of the island's cliff top.

Nesting

They return to their nesting sites in April, gradually building up in numbers as the egg laying season approaches. They nest underground in burrows, not only battling with each other for these, but also with Manx Shearwaters since both species use the same sort of burrows for nesting. Puffins prefer nest-sites close to the cliff-top since the parent birds can come in quickly and then escape again to sea, giving the predatory gulls the minimum chance to attack them. The Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, often chase Puffins that are bringing food back to their chick and try to steal it, but the Great-backed Gull will kill and eat the adult



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Breeding & Young

The nest chamber may be many feet underground and is often lined with bits of dead grass, Sea Campion and Bluebell stems. In this, the female Puffin lays her single egg, usually in the early part of May. In size and appearance, the egg closely resembles a white hen's egg and is incubated by the parent birds in turn for about six weeks. The newly-hatched chick weighs about 35-45grams and looks rather like a darkish-grey powder-puff since the down is so long that it almost completely covers the small bill and the legs and feet.



The chick remains in the burrow for about six weeks and reaches a weight of about 300 grams during this time.

Food

Both parents bring food to the chick; the commonest item is Sandeels which the parents catch by diving. Having caught a Sandeel, it is held between the tongue and upper mandible, enabling the bird to catch another, and another. On Skomer, the normal number of fish carried back to the nest at each visit is about 10, but the

world record is 80 (albeit small larval fish), recorded on an island in northern Norway. Most chicks receive some five to eight feeds a day, each averaging about eight grams.

Towards the end of July, when the chicks are ready to leave the island, they are still not fully-grown, being about 70% of the adult's weight. Unlike the young of Razorbills and Guillemots, they can fly reasonably well at this stage. However, they are still very vulnerable to attacks by predatory gulls, so they leave at night, working their way down to the cliff-edge and taking off in the darkness. They go by themselves and are out of sight of land by day-break. Thereafter, they are on their own and receive no further parental care.

The young Puffin remains at sea for almost two years; almost no one-year Puffins make land-fall at the nesting colonies. From the age of two onwards the young birds spend more and more time at the colony in summer, looking for a mate and prospecting for a burrow. Although a few may start to breed at the age of four, most do not do so until they are five. The breeding success of Puffins is not very high; on average each pair rears a chick every two years and less than one in five of these young survive to reach breeding age.



Once they have attained breeding age, they are long-lived birds. In good times, as many as 95% of the breeding birds may survive to breed the following year (though in recent years on Skomer the survival has been nearer 85%). A 95% annual survival means that the average expectation of life for a Puffin that has just started to breed is about 20 years, so that counting the five years of immaturity, the average life expectancy of Puffins is about 25 years. Some birds live much longer, however, with the current record on Skomer more than 38 years!

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Research

Research on Skokholm and Skomer's Puffins has been carried out for many years. The first studies were carried out by Ronald Lockley in the 1930's on Skokholm. Since then much more has been undertaken by a variety of observers, and much of what we know about the life-history of our Puffins is derived from their studies.



Watching

Puffins can be seen on Skomer from April until August, though in early April they may be here in large numbers on one day with none the next, until they settle mid-month. Mid-June to mid-July is the time to see really big numbers, as parents are busy to-ing and fro-ing with food for their chicks. Numbers are also swelled then by birds too young to breed but are prospecting for the future. By the first week in August only a handful remain, and these are soon to depart, leaving the Puffin colonies deserted again until the following spring.



If you would like to know more about the Skomer Puffins, and at the same time support the ongoing programme of work, then why not [Protect-a-Puffin](#) and adopt one of your very own? Details from the Wildlife Trust of South & West Wales.

Pictures by Dave Boyle, Chris Taylor and Ben Dean